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ABSTRACT

This digest compares long range planning with strategic planning in the community college, focusing on examples of colleges' strategic planning processes and on the future of strategic planning. Long range planning tends to be static, focusing on developing a plan based on what has already happened, while strategic planning emphasizes process over product, focusing on long-range thinking rather than a long-range plan, exploiting new and different opportunities as they emerge. Strategic planning starts with environmental scanning, a process of studying the external environment via newspapers, literature and periodicals for emerging issues that pose threats or opportunities to an institution. Evaluation of these issues is followed by trend forecasting, goal setting, and implementation and monitoring of results. The strategic planning process of the future will require a new organizational culture--one with decentralized decision making, collaborative governance, structure and systems aligned with institutional values and goals, and the ability to thrive on chaos. Contains 13 references. (PGS)

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Strategic Planning for a New Century: Process over Product

By Elaine Howell

Since the 1980s, community college administrators have been using the strategic planning process as a way to guide their institutions into the future and soften the surprises that come with economic, technological, demographic, and political change. However, a strategic plan can be limiting and even damaging to an organization when it does not allow for flexibility. In a rapidly changing world, uncertainty is an element that must be built into any long-range plan, as "long-range *thinking* is important, but long-range *plans* can be traps" (American Society of Training and Development, 1990, p. 10). This digest discusses traditional strategic planning in the community college, the people involved, examples of colleges' planning processes, and recent thinking that supports a change in the way institutions plan for the future.

Strategic vs. Long-Range Planning

Long-range planning and strategic planning are often used as synonyms, but there is a difference: strategic planning aims to exploit the new and different opportunities of tomorrow, in contrast to long-range planning, which tries to optimize for tomorrow the trends of today (Morrison, et al., 1984). Long-range planning is usually inwardly focused and consists of monitoring trends of interest to the institution, forecasting the expected future of these trends, defining the desired future for the institution by setting goals, implementing policies and actions, and evaluating the effects of these actions and policies on the selected trends.

In contrast, strategic planning begins with environmental scanning, a process of studying the external environment via newspapers, literature, and periodicals for emerging issues that pose threats or opportunities to an institution. Each issue is then evaluated with regard to its possible impact. The environmental scan and evaluation are combined with the conventional long-range planning process to produce six stages of strategic planning: (1) environmental scanning, (2) evaluation of issues, (3) forecasting, (4) goal setting, (5) implementation, and (6) monitoring (Morrison et al., 1984). This model allows for both internal and external issues to be considered during the planning process.

As an example, Capital Community-Technical College (Connecticut) presents its strategic planning process as a system that integrates four components: *plan, do, check,* and *act* (Mohammadi, 1997). The first component consists of the environmental scan and the formulation of the college's mission, vision, strategic issues, and long-range institutional goals. The second component is comprised of establishing departmental objectives, activities, measures, methods, and intended outcomes. All academic and administrative departments are required to exchange data and information, and at the same time develop operating procedures that will enable them to assess their stated objectives and activities. Capital's third component involves the assessment and evaluation of intended outcomes, and the fourth component focuses on using the results of the evaluation to improve academic programs, academic support services, and administrative processes at the college.

The Human Aspect of Planning

Perhaps the most important element in the strategic planning process is the people. A successful plan will have a group of organized staff, trustees, administrators, faculty, and, often, students behind it. Some common needs of individuals should be kept in mind during any planning process: the need to feel important, to be respected, to be informed, to receive recognition and rewards, to know the expectations held for performance, and to have influence (McClenney, 1982). Recognizing these needs and facilitating an environment conducive to trust and communication are imperative. Absence of trust will "short-circuit even the most creative plans for organizational development" (p. 107).

Strategic planning at Victor Valley College (California) met with resistance several times in the early 1990s when change was attempted (Gould and Caldwell, 1998). The existing organizational culture at the college was one of distrust and segmentalism in which faculty, staff, and administration had become adversarial and territorial. When a new president arrived in 1990 and began making efforts to change the organization, he was unsuccessful. But, after embracing the principles set forth by Covey (1990), most notably personal trustworthiness, interpersonal trust, and managerial empowerment, the president helped garner the faith and cooperation of his employees. An environmental scan and a strategic plan were successfully completed, followed by an eventual re-engineering of the college.

Most colleges recognize the importance of individual and group personalities in the strategic planning process. Rio Salado College (Arizona) implemented some helpful activities for its employees during this process, including a survey that identified employees' biggest fears about change, an employee training program and empowerment training manual, a weekly President's bulletin, a monthly President's breakfast with a small group of randomly selected employees, and a rewards and recognition program (Thor, 1993). Allegany Community College in Maryland developed a model for managing organizational change that emphasized the human element (Frank and Rocks, 1996). Built into the model was a component for active, two-way

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communication, as well as a component that called for commitment and input from all personnel to the planning process. According to this model, organizational leaders should be sensitive in managing change and assisting employees with transitions, and proposed changes should begin with frank discussions of possible causes of resistance.

A Traditional Model

One of the foremost models used in strategic planning and change management, Lewin's (1951) Forcefield Analysis defines an organizational environment in need of change as a state of imbalance between driving forces (legislation, economic imperatives, competitive pressures) and restraining forces (traditional practices, organizational culture, job insecurity). To achieve change, three steps are required: (1) the driving and restraining forces that hold the organization in a state of equilibrium must be unfrozen; (2) an imbalance must be introduced that enables change to take place, preferably achieved by reducing the restraints; and (3) the new elements must be refrozen. In the case of Victor Valley College, mentioned above, the restraining force of organizational culture was reduced, "unfreezing" the state of equilibrium. In time, the institution was successfully transformed (Gould and Caldwell, 1998).

The Future of Strategic Planning

Although Lewin's model remains popular more than 50 years after its initial development, some scholars prefer more dynamic models. Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) developed a model of strategic change that emphasizes continuous interplay between the components of change, differentiating between the inner and outer context: outer refers to external factors such as economic, political and social environments; and inner is concerned with internal influences such as resources, capabilities, and culture. Vaill (1989) asserts that the reason some traditional planning models are becoming outmoded is that the contexts surrounding a situation will not hold still long enough to make a planned course of action feasible. Drucker (as cited in Lorenzo, 1993) explains that organizations can no longer base decisions on what is most likely to happen. They must ask instead, "What has already happened that will create the future?" (p. 50)

According to Lorenzo (1993), a new planning model must emphasize process over product. As the environment changes, strategic planning must evolve into an ongoing process. Requirements for a new model of strategic planning in community colleges also include: (1) producing a clear sense of purpose and an understanding of the college's relationship to the larger environment; (2) devoting greater attention to measuring effectiveness and improving quality; (3) objectively and systematically monitoring faculty and staff attitudes; (4) determining more accurately the external forces that trigger the need for change; (5) designing an environmental scan that reflects the expectations of multiple and diverse constituencies; and (6) providing a means to monitor and influence public opinion.

Planning efforts must also take institutional culture into account. Only by understanding the cultures and subcultures unique to an institution can strategic planning and change management attempt to include all facets of a college's population. Carter (1998) asserts that "transformation calls for the entire college community to become involved" (p. 441) and describes any major change in the community college as a *cultural* change. According to Carter, "there are disruptive and uncomfortable dimensions to cultural change ... [but] it can also be a time of tremendous innovation and creativity" (p. 447). What should accompany any effective plan is a set of activities designed to support the process of cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Community college leaders in the next century must create a new organizational culture--one with decentralized decision making, collaborative governance, structure and systems aligned with institutional values and goals, and the ability to thrive on chaos (Gould and Caldwell, 1998). The strategic planning process must be constant and fluid, with the flexibility to accommodate change in internal and external forces. Instead of focusing on a strategic *plan*, community colleges should emphasize strategic *planning*--a verb rather than a noun, an ongoing and people-centered activity rather than a finished product.

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